

From Reflection to Resumes: Alumni Perceptions of a Multi-Term Public Service Program's Connection to Career

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how alumni of a multi-term public service program understand the connection between the program and their career development. Qualitative data were collected from 393 alumni based on six open-ended survey questions. While career and professional development is not an explicit goal of the program, a thematic analysis suggests that alumni perceived that the program connected to career reflection, boosted their resume, and guided them toward a public service career or specific jobs.

Keywords: undergraduate, career development, service professions, professional paths

There is a growing interest in exploring the connections between undergraduate student engagement in public service and community engagement programs and alumni careers after graduation. Debates about the purpose and value of higher education and traditional four-year degrees (Bok, 2013; Delblanco, 2012; Hacker & Driefus, 2011) have presented the need to articulate the impact of courses of study and programming in terms of career development and professional training. In addition, there is also increased interest in understanding not just the short-term impact of one service-learning program experience but the longer-term impact of collections of experiences (Mitchell, Battistoni, Keene, & Reiff, 2013).

Although career preparation may not be an explicit goal of many service-learning and community engagement programs, public service and community engagement experiences can be among the strongest experiential, field-based aspects of a students' education. With this context in mind, this

study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do alumni of a multi-term public service program understand the connection between the program and their career development?
- How do responses differ among students of different genders and social class backgrounds?

This paper presents the findings from data gathered through a survey of alumni from a multi-term public service program. Alumni were asked six open-ended questions about the components of the program they believed were most important and the aspects that needed improvement. A thematic analysis was conducted to present results from open coding of both previously established and emergent themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The program does not currently have any explicit mention of or focus on career in its goals or its

offerings. The qualitative exploration of alumni's perceptions of the relationship between various program components and their careers in this study reveals specific career-related themes and the potential differences in their perceptions among alumni of varying gender and class backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Learning and Service Careers

Much of the literature that considers connections between undergraduates' engagement in public service and community engagement experiences and their career development focuses specifically on service learning, a core component of the multi-term public service program described in this study. Service learning is a type of engagement prevalent on college campuses and is defined as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p.5). Service learning has been identified along with community-based learning as a high-impact practice that can—by itself and when strategically paired with other experiences—significantly improve a variety of educational outcomes (Bringle, 2017; Kuh, 2008).

Even though academic service-learning experiences do not typically extend past a single semester, a number of studies have found some connections between these experiences and participants' career development, most notably the decision to pursue a service-related career. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that participants in service-learning programs had a greater appreciation of and value for service careers. Similarly, several studies reported that alumni of service-learning programs were more likely to pursue service-related careers (Astin et al., 2000; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Warchal & Ruiz, 2004). Warchal and Ruiz's (2004) research highlighted the significant role service learning played in

professional development and civic leadership. Artale and Blieszner (2001) also noted that service-learning experiences can reinforce career choices and had the strongest impact on career development when the work aligns with students' intellectual interests and career goals. According to Arum and Roksa (2014), 25% of college students find their first job after college through their college volunteering, internship, or employer, which indicates that participation in service learning and other service programs may not only inspire general career goals, but also connect students to specific service-career positions.

Skill Development and Career Aspirations through Public Service and Community Engagement

There is evidence that the types of learning and skill development associated with service learning and other forms of public service and community engagement programming can contribute to professional development and alumni career outcomes. Researchers have reported that service learning contributes to a wide variety of skills such as critical thinking and writing (Astin et al., 2000), understanding of course content (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; McKenna & Rizzo, 1990), and political participation after college (Perrin & Gillis, 2019). However, most research focuses on short-term learning outcomes, rather than postgraduate impacts (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). There is a need to further examine how these skills transfer to alumni careers and how these types of learning outcomes intersect with career development over time.

Studies examining the impacts of public service programs on career usually focus on particular courses or programs rather than the collective outcomes of students' public service and community engagement experiences. Often these programs are designed for students already pursuing a specific career path. In their study of an engineering service-learning program, for example, Huff et al. (2016) reported that

alumni saw the program as a bridge from education to practice, a means for gaining workplace experience, and an opportunity to develop a variety of professional skills. Tiessen et al. (2018) also documented evidence that several forms of experiential education—including community service learning—were perceived by graduates of an international development studies program as having a positive impact on their competitiveness in the job market and their ability to access jobs within the sector. Laursen et al. (2012) studied a university-based school science outreach program and found that it influenced participants' career paths and professional socialization. In this study, for some students, participation in the program confirmed their career intentions and provided knowledge and skills needed to succeed in their chosen paths. For others in the study, participation helped them make a change in career direction by providing low-risk opportunities to explore an alternate career and discover new career options.

Studies regarding programs that were not designed for students already pursuing specific career paths also reported outcomes related to career development. Ma Hok-ka et al. (2016) found that participation in service learning in Hong Kong was a significant element of students' whole-person development, civic responsibility, and career exploration beyond graduation. Service learning helped students develop their skills for future careers and also influenced their career choices. Engberg et al. (2018) studied undergraduate participants who trained and served as academic coaches. Their results showed that participants experienced significant social justice learning, the development of translatable skills and values, and a higher degree of commitment to public service careers. In their study of the alumni of a program in which students served as managers of an on-campus emergency homeless shelter, Stolley et al. (2017) documented that alumni who responded stayed involved with the shelter in some way and reported outcomes associated with their

experiences. These outcomes included changed stereotypes and broader worldviews, as well as development of transferable skills, including interpersonal and communication skills, leadership, and teamwork. Karlsson's (2016) study revealed that reciprocal relationships between campus and community partners represent a major mechanism influencing student career goals through the experience of participation in community-based learning courses. Other components of the community-based learning experiences that play a valuable role in career development included opportunities for student-led work and the alignment of the community partner with the student's existing interests.

Service Engagement and Early Career Earnings

The notion that postgraduate earnings can or should be used as a substantial measure of success is controversial (Newman, 2014), yet some researchers have used earnings as a key measure to understand the relationship between various components of an undergraduate education and career development, and uncovered a complex relationship between various forms of engagement in college and financial benefit as demonstrated in the early careers of graduates (Hu & Wolniak, 2010; Hu & Wolniak, 2013; Matthews et al., 2015). Hu and Wolniak (2010) found that *social engagement*—including participation in community service activities—during college was positively related to early career earnings of graduates. Hu and Wolniak (2013) also identified that social and academic engagement during college had differential impact on students of different genders, races, and degrees of academic preparation. For instance, they noted that men experience a higher degree of earnings benefit from academic engagement and women from social engagement and that students with lower levels of academic preparation saw little influence of engagement on their early career earnings. Matthews et al. (2015) reported that graduates with service-learning experience specifically had

significantly higher starting salaries and significantly shorter time to receive a first raise than their peers without service-learning experiences. However, there were no significant differences in (a) whether either set received a raise or promotion, (b) whether the job was in their desired field, (c) the overall time to find an initial job, or (d) the length of time from hiring to first promotion. Thus, while service learning may not aid all dimensions of early career success, the evidence suggested that it was likely to have a positive impact.

Gender and Social Class

Elements of a person's identity such as gender and social class have an impact not only on students' educational experiences but also college graduates' transitions into the labor market. Women are more likely to find themselves in lower paid positions than men, in large part due to their college majors (Fox et al., 2011; Shauman, 2006). Students from middle and upper class families are more likely to treat post-college jobs as an opportunity for "job shopping" (Settersten & Ray, 2010) or identity exploration (Arnett, 2004). Students from working class backgrounds, on the other hand, are more likely to focus on building skills and experiences that enable them to transition into long-term stable careers (Gillis, 2019).

There is also a body of research suggesting that students' intersecting identities have profound and under-studied influences on their participation in and learning from experiences in public service and community engagement (Becker & Paul, 2015; Chesler & Vaseques Scalera, 2000; Dunlap, 1998). Women are more likely to be volunteers than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016) and are more likely to participate in service-learning programs (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Stroup et al. (2015) reported that males are more likely to see service as a way to develop skills or career and are less motivated by a sense of altruism. Chesbrough (2011) found

men more likely to consider outcomes of service, external motivators, and limited time commitment in service involvement; women were more likely motivated by internal and more subjective compulsions. Keller et al. (2003) explored feminist critiques that service learning and care ethics might reinforce a counterproductive self-sacrificial ethic in female students. They argued, however, that teaching service learning and care ethics in feminist studies courses can provide students with an opportunity to apply in-class gender analysis in service contexts that can help students develop a political vision for a genuinely caring society.

Likewise, students' social class backgrounds affect their engagement with public service and community engagement programs. Students from more disadvantaged class backgrounds are limited in the time that they can spend volunteering in college due to the high number of hours they must work for pay during the week to support themselves (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Coles, 1999). Thus, when they do engage in service, they may be more focused on the career benefits they can gain from participation than their more class advantaged peers.

Based on the literature reviewed, a multi-term public service program that includes academic service learning would be expected to have some relationship to students' career development for many students. This relationship could be indirect through impacts on educational outcomes and transferrable skill development or more directly relate to career choice and even early career earnings. In addition, students' gender and class backgrounds are important factors to take into consideration when exploring this relationship. This study seeks to add to the literature through employing qualitative analysis to explore how alumni understand their participation in a multi-term public service program, its connections to career development, and whether and in what ways those connections might differ based on gender and social class.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Buckley Public Service Scholars program (BPSS) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) was launched in 2003 to connect students with similar interests and provide special opportunities for leadership development and community engagement over multiple years of their undergraduate education. Since its inception, 9,678 students have participated in the BPSS program and documented more than 1.8 million hours of service. About 10 percent of UNC undergraduates enroll as participants, and roughly a third of those complete all components of the program.

The program is open to all undergraduates with at least four semesters left at UNC. It provides an opportunity for students to self-identify as committed to making a positive impact through service and to receive support and structure in doing so. To complete the program and graduate with the distinction of being a Buckley Public Service Scholar, a student must (a) attend an orientation session, (b) document at least 300 hours of service, (c) take at least one academic service-learning course, (d) attend at least four non-academic skills trainings (many of which are organized by the program), (e) complete a senior reflection, and (f) achieve a minimum final cumulative grade point average. While completing the program components, participants build online portfolios reflecting on their experiences and learning. Students regularly continue using the portfolio system to document their service-related experiences far beyond the program expectations, with some students logging well over 1,000 hours of service by the time they graduate.

The Carolina Center for Public Service articulates the goal of the program to be strengthening the culture of service and engagement at UNC by:

- Challenging students to increase the breadth and depth of their involvement in communities in the state and beyond;

- Fostering connections between the University, its students, and the community;
- Promoting student participation in varying dimensions of public service: direct, organizational, and policy; and
- Developing students' capacity for engaging in their communities in meaningful ways.

Although career development and discernment are not explicit goals of the program, they could be seen as implicit through the focus on skills training and student development. As part of the senior reflection all participants complete, students are prompted to reflect on how their philosophy of service has developed over time and in connection with experiences documented in their portfolios. Many students discuss their career plans after graduation within that reflection. Throughout the BPSS program, internships, service year programs, and other service-related post-graduation opportunities are promoted via email through the network of enrolled students. Sometimes trainings or events are offered in partnership with University Career Services or graduate and professional schools (such as the UNC School of Government, UNC School of Social Work, and the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health). In recent years, graduate students associated with the BPSS program have offered an optional communication-related skills training workshop on writing personal statements for graduate and professional school applications that focuses explicitly on how to talk about service experiences.

METHODS

Survey Design

A survey was designed as part of a larger collaborative program evaluation between BPSS at UNC and a similar multi-term program at another large, public research university (Nilsen et al., 2020). The survey

included both quantitative and qualitative items measuring postgraduate occupation, civic engagement, civic-mindedness, and participants' experiences and feedback regarding the BPSS program. The instrument built upon and adapted items from surveys of multi-term public service and civic-learning programs (Mitchell et al., 2013) and also the Civic-Minded Professional Scale (Hatcher, 2008). The survey contained six open-ended questions focused on respondents' perceptions of the important elements of the BPSS program and the impact of service-related experiences:

- When you think back at your time in the Buckley Public Service Scholars program, what do you believe were the two or three most important elements of the program, ones that produced the most benefits to you? Please describe below.
- Why were these program elements important to you? Please explain below.
- When you think about the Buckley Public Service Scholars program, what one or two things do you wish the program would have taught you or done to improve your learning? Please list and explain below.
- How would you describe the impact of your service-related experiences while a student at UNC?
- What, if any, suggestions do you have on how we might improve the Buckley Public Service Scholars program?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your public service experience while at UNC or since graduation?

Respondents' demographic information and their responses to these six open-ended survey

questions were analyzed to address the research questions in this study.

Respondents to the survey included program alumni who had graduated between spring 2005 and spring 2016 for whom contact information was available. Qualtrics was used to manage the survey distribution. Alumni contact information was obtained from the Carolina Center for Public Service. The center independently maintains its alumni records and contact information and was able to cross-reference and update some records with another, larger UNC alumni database system. To enhance the survey return rate, the survey was sent first through an email from two alumni inviting participation. Staff who support the program sent two follow-up emails. An update on the response rate of the graduating year of the recipient and the response rate of the class with the highest response rate was included in both follow-up emails with an invitation for each class to compete for the highest response rate. A total of 1,749 (of 1,947) BPSS alumni received the survey in the fall of 2016. The response rate was 32.2% (N=563), and 393 alumni responded to at least one of these open-ended questions. Thus, the sample size for the qualitative analysis was 393.

Among the BPSS alumni respondents, 79.9% were female and 68.2% White compared to the BPSS alumni population's makeup of 82.4% female and 58.8% White. Among the respondents, 13.9% were first-generation college students, 5.0% were immigrants or refugees to the US, 4.1% commuted to attend UNC. The majority of respondents had worked in at least one service-related field since graduation with the following three sectors emerging as the most commonly reported by respondents: nonprofit/social service (23.1%), healthcare (20.9%), and/or education (19.9%). Of the alumni who responded to at least one open-ended question, 77.6% were female and 14.8% were first-generation college students.

This study was submitted for review by the Institutional Review Board and was determined to be exempt.

Qualitative Analysis

The research team employed thematic analysis to inductively analyze the open-ended survey responses in an iterative manner (Miles et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). First, the primary analyst conducted an open-coding process whereby any themes that emerged from the 86 respondents¹ were inductively coded in Dedoose. While open coding, analytic memos about emergent themes as well as descriptions of individual codes were documented. After the initial open coding process was complete, the research team met to discuss the emergent codes and to finalize the coding scheme for the systemic analysis of all respondents. As a result of these discussions the primary analyst created a codebook with 16 primary codes such as *motivation*, *support*, *passions*, *service opportunities*, and *career*. These codes were then systematically applied to all open-ended responses and memos about emergent themes were kept. Codes were not mutually exclusive. The same alumni response may have been double coded with multiple themes. Additionally, each question was coded separately per respondent so that, for instance, if one respondent mentioned *career* in three open-ended questions, then that person would produce three instances of the code *career*.

After this round was complete, the team met again and decided on a more detailed investigation of the general theme *career*. The primary analyst systematically coded all *career* excerpts additionally by at least one of the following inductively generated subcodes: *public service career*, *direct connection to job*, *career reflection/ideas*, and *resume-boost*. At all stages of this coding process, the team

reviewed the analyst's work to ensure agreement with coding decisions.

To analyze how these coded responses fit into broader themes, the research team conducted two further stages of analysis: analyzing the coded themes by question and then by gender and first-generation status. Participants' first-generation status was used to measure social class background, as students who are the first in their family to graduate with a four-year degree are typically disadvantaged compared to their non-first-generation peers in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital that help more advantaged students successfully navigate college more easily academically and socially (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). First, the research team calculated how many students' responses were coded with each code by question—such as *service opportunities* being coded 179 times for important elements, but only 37 times for wished program taught. Then, the content of the responses was analyzed to understand the nature of the responses for each code within each question. Similarly, to consider gender and social class differences, gender and first-generation status in number of coded responses was explored to see if female/male or first-generation/non-first-generation students' responses were coded disproportionately with particular codes.

RESULTS

The results were organized to address the two research questions in this study. To address the first research question, an overview of major themes that emerged from survey responses was provided. Specific subthemes related to *career* were highlighted in terms of participants' perception regarding

¹These 86 respondents on whom the initial open coding was conducted were from different groups of survey respondents with some being earlier survey respondents (1-50) and others being later survey respondents (313-349) to increase the variability in types of respondents whose responses were analyzed in this initial process.

²Two additional codes called leadership and networking were not part of the career code but instead their own separate codes. This decision was made because, while alumni may have done these things in order to aid their careers, we do not know that was the case unless they explicitly state it, in which case the response would also be coded as career.

the important elements of the program and participants’ wishes and suggestions. Findings regarding response pattern differences based on gender and first-generation status were reported to address the second research question.

Survey Response Overview

When considering the questions related to the most important elements of the program, *career* was one of the top ten major themes that emerged. In response to the questions, “When you think about the Buckley Public Service Scholars program, what one or two things do you wish the program would have taught you or done to improve your learning?” and also “What, if any, suggestions do you have on how we might improve the Buckley Public Service Scholars program?,” comments related to *career* again emerged as one theme, but not the dominant one, in response to either question.

Table 1 shows each major theme, sorted by number of occurrences in response to the question about important elements in the program.

Alumni reported that *service opportunities, knowledge/skill, structure, motivation, values, and social opportunities* were the most important elements of the program. In contrast, they most commonly reported that they wished that the program taught *knowledge/skills, values, structure, and career*; and the most common suggested improvements were related to *social opportunities, knowledge/skills, and career*. Thus, despite the fact that the program goals do not explicitly include any mention of *career*, alumni reported that they wanted the program to more explicitly include *career*. The important elements question was asked much earlier in the survey than the other questions, generating many more responses.

Table 1. Frequency of Code Occurrence by Question

Theme identified	Number of occurrences			Total
	Important elements	Wished program taught	Suggested improvements	
Service opportunities	179	37	14	230
Knowledge/skills	164	117	40	321
Structure	108	69	10	187
Motivation	102	6	14	122
Values	102	23	8	133
Social opportunities	98	75	47	220
Career	80	54	20	154
Reflection	58	24	13	95
New service	53	11	2	66
Passions	52	7	3	62
Networking	29	25	17	71
Support	28	28	16	72

Thus, the coded instances of *career* were unusual in the analysis in that almost half of the responses coded *career* were in response to questions about wishing the program taught or suggested improvement (while most other non-*career* codes were overwhelmingly from responses to important elements question). The higher relative frequency of *career* codes within the responses to what alumni wished the program taught and their suggested improvements suggests that many alumni are dissatisfied with the way that *career* is currently handled by the program.

Career as an Important Element

To better understand what alumni reported the program was doing well and what they thought needed to be improved in relation to *career*, the research team inductively generated subcodes related to *career*. Table 2 shows the patterns in *career* subthemes by question asked.

The subtheme *career reflections/ideas* included instances of alumni discussing how their experiences of public service in the program related to their discernment process for trying to decide what their career might be after graduation or for graduate school, including mentoring or discussing the logistics of possible career ideas. Some saw specific, discreet experiences having had a significant impact on their future career paths. One White male, non-first-generation alumnus respond-

ent suggested,

Undoubtedly the most important experience of my time in Public Service Scholars, and maybe of my entire undergraduate experience, was my Alternative Spring Break trip to post-Katrina New Orleans... [because it] opened my eyes to the depths of the social and economic problems facing American society and set me on a path towards public service work.

For other alumni, ongoing service experiences helped them to realize their future fields. One White female, non-first-generation alumna reflected, “When volunteering at UNC Hospitals, I discovered my love for nursing. If not for that experience at UNC Hospitals, I do not know that I would be a nurse.”

The subtheme identified above as *resume boost* describes instances of alumni respondents acknowledging how they saw their public service experiences and participation in the program as having given them a credential or contributing valuably to their resumes. For some, their service experiences provided them with something to talk about in an interview or gave them a skillset or value not explicitly related to public service—such as leadership or commitment—that serves them well in their jobs. One White male, non-first-generation transfer alumnus

Table 2. *Frequency of Career Subtheme Occurrence by Question*

Career Subtheme	Number of occurrences	
	Important elements	Wished program taught and suggested improvements
Career reflections/ideas	41	31
Resume boost	34	19
Public service career	21	8
Direct connection to job	4	6

reflected on the important elements of the program for them being “Self-initiative, taking steps independently to complete a project. Selection, deciding where to contribute, Commitment, honoring the established volunteer relationship for a given amount of time.” He went on to explain, “The program elements taught me lessons both that indirectly and directly impact my experience ... in the workplace.”

Another alumna, White female and non-first-generation, reflected on the most important elements prompt, stating,

Participating in the philanthropy course sponsored by the Public Service department, committing to a couple [of] organization[s] as a volunteer throughout my college career, being able to put together a portfolio and list my [completion] of the program on resumes/job interviews.

She then went on to suggest that, “These elements were important because they provided me with unique learning opportunities. The program also provided a way for me to target my public service in a way that benefited my career after college.”

Some alumni suggested more simple and utilitarian incentives to participation, such as a White female non-first-generation alumna stating, “I mostly did it so I could get to [wear] the cord at graduation and to have something on my resume.” Other respondents acknowledged the reality of this dynamic within the program but discussed it more critically. One respondent, a White male non-first-generation alumnus who was an immigrant or refugee to the United States, reflected,

I think that the program should become more stringent. By the end of the program, as a result of personal developments about many of the questions that you have asked about

here (views on self, identity, social involvement, social justice), I was deeply frustrated at the number of people who did the bare minimum to get honoured, to pad a CV both with service more generally and with the service scholars honours to get into med school, consulting or some other highly competitive field. All while really not having undergone any radical change as a caring and aware human being (though I'm sure there is some measurable impact that you will obviously find among the responses to this survey). More needs to be done about critically engaging topics of race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability etc. While, [sic] I personally think it's deeply hypocritical to be awarding someone a service award who is going to turn around and join an investment banking firm, there is at least a burden of responsibility on the service scholars program to more critically force all participants in the program to develop a better sense of the intense social issues plaguing the US and not support voyeuristic and potentially counterproductive voluntourism both here in the US and particularly abroad...

Although graduates do go on to a wide variety of careers, many do, as noted above, go on to work in public service careers. The subtheme *public service career* refers to alumni explicitly invoking the idea that their public service experiences in the program were related to their careers or wanting a career in public service. One alumna, a White female non-first-generation student, reflected, Service-learning courses ... were important to take to learn the best way to serve underrepresented communities. The training courses required (like [a campus training about sexual or interpersonal

violence]) were also essential in helping us aid those in need. ... I'm in the military medical school and these trainings help me help others deal with sensitive topics like sexual assault, gender identity, domestic violence, etc. Knowing how to serve a community has also helped me serve those in my city.

Very few alumni actually described more direct connections between their service experiences and jobs after graduation, as reflected in the relatively low rate of occurrence (4) for the subtheme *direct connection to job*. Thus, while a few alumni did report that participation in volunteering through the program helped them get a specific position after graduation, this was not a common outcome that alumni reported.

In some instances, alumni responses to this question combined multiple career subthemes in their answers, such as this reflection that combines *resume boost* with *career reflection/ideas* from a biracial Hispanic and White woman who was an immigrant or refugee to the United States:

Two ideas emphasized by UNC that benefitted me: Public service is 1) more than hands-on charity work (i.e. building a house) and 2) another means of developing skills (and thus, attaining employment). I engaged in service that was more closely related to my career goals, although not traditional "service." UNC taught me to use these experiences as a personal strength—highlighting certain abilities or skills when seeking a job. For example, I got asked about the BPSS program in a job interview for a lab company. It was unexpected but the employer was impressed. Definitely served as a benefit in that sense.

[Why were these program elements important to you? Please explain below.]

As mentioned above—strengthened my commitment, guided me in a career path that would be a better fit for me, and taught me to advertise my service as a useful career skill.

Wishes and Suggestions Related to Career

Because answers to the questions related to what respondents wished they learned and what improvements they would suggest were often related, the *career* subtheme responses to these questions were analyzed together.

As with the responses related to important elements, the most frequent subtheme of comments related to *career* in response to these questions was *career reflection/ideas*. Alumni suggested that the program could do more to encourage and facilitate reflection on careers than it does and often offered specific suggestions such as, "More speakers that talked about careers in service with various backgrounds (government, nonprofit, political)" (from a Black female first-generation student) or (from a Hispanic female non-first-generation student) to

Provide career advising on how to develop a career in public service/social innovation; connection to mission-driven companies in NC that might want to hire UNC grads; funding for year-long, post-degree fellowships doing mission-driven work in NC (kind of like AmeriCorps).

One respondent, a White female non-first-generation alumna wrote:

JOBS. UNC values service and talks about how much service its students do and then ships them off to for profit consulting jobs. We must do a better job of exposing students to the vast array of jobs in the service, nonprofit, advocacy, government, and philanthropic sectors. And we

must advocate within those sectors to create pipelines for diverse talent and positions that adequately compensate students.

[What, if any, suggestions do you have on how we might improve the Buckley Public Service Scholars program?]

Career counseling. Keep these amazing students in the public sector!! Show them the [abundance] of pathways (that it is more than just local nonprofits that pay poorly).

The subtheme of resume boost also emerged in response to these questions, as many alumni saw a greater opportunity for the program to help students articulate the value of their experiences in service and leverage them for future careers. One White male, non-first-generation transfer student respondent reflected that he wished he had learned "... how to market the experiences on a resume. Or, how to work the experience into an interview. Intentional professional support," and further suggested as an improvement, "Have a career service aspect of the program." Another respondent, a Black female non-first-generation student, mentioned wishing she had learned "...marketing my public service background to my future employers." While they could get help with these tasks through UNC University Career Services, these alumni expressed that they wish the public service program had actively provided this kind of mentoring in how to explain the value of their service during college.

The subthemes *public service career* (8) and *direct connection to job* (6) were present but less prominent in response to these questions. Some that did express these subthemes in their responses gave suggestions about giving more presentations about public service careers or more opportunities to directly connect with post-graduate employers. One, a White female non-first-generation student, suggested, "I also wish

there were more opportunities to connect with and learn from BPSS alumni and how they may (or may not) have translated their service in college to their work after graduating." Another White female, non-first-generation student asked for "More networking opportunities within the public service realm (especially for jobs once graduated)," and a Black female, non-first-generation student reflected,

I wish the program would have had a connection with national service organizations to discuss how to continue this legacy of service beyond UNC. I remember the reflection paper asking us how we plan to continue this work of being engaged and giving back. I feel BPSS had an opportunity to showcase that service can be a lifelong activity. Perhaps host a non-profit/service fair in the same way Career Services hosts job fairs. Or make it feel more exclusive for the participants and offer panels just for them. Making BPSS feel more like you are receiving benefits of some kind will drive participation."

All in all, alumni wished that the program engaged more directly with career in broad ways such as developing career ideas and also specific ways including helping them market skills they learned or directly connecting them with potential employers. In particular, it appeared that females and those from middle class backgrounds were more likely to discuss various career topics—findings potentially at odds with previous research that suggests male and working class students might be more career focused.

Gender Differences

The research team analyzed overall themes in the data by respondents' self-identified gender to see if gendered patterns emerged in how respondents talked about the relationship between their experiences in the

program and their careers or career development.² Notably, males and females discussed career overall about equally. Of those responses coded for career, 118 (78%) of respondents were female while 33 (22%) were male, while the survey respondents considered in this qualitative analysis overall were 77.6% female and 22.4% male, a figure which also closely follows program participation.

When analyzed by subcode, those who talked about *direct connection to jobs* (seven females compared with one male) and *resume boosts* (44 females or 80% compared to 11 male or 20%) were more likely to be females than males. Males, in contrast, were proportionally more likely to talk about *public service careers* (12 males or 32% of the subtheme from 22.4% of the respondents compared to 25 females or 68% of the subtheme from 77.6% of the respondents) than females. When looking at codes beyond *career*, females were disproportionately more likely than males to discuss their *passions* (59 females or 84% compared to 11 males or 16%). While only 22.4% of respondents were males, they provided 26% of all coded responses about *knowledge/skills* and 30% of all coded responses about *leadership*. Meanwhile, females were much more likely to bring up *networking* than males (91% of coded

networking were females and only 9% males).

First-generation Status Differences

The research team also analyzed overall themes in the data by respondents’ class background when they were in college: either first-generation college student (first in the family to get a four year degree) or non-first-generation college student. About 15% of open-ended coded responses were from first-generation alumni while 85% were from non-first-generation alumni.

Some class differences emerge in the likelihood to bring up certain themes, including the various *career* subthemes. For non-*career* themes, first-generation students were more likely than non-first-generation students to discuss *leadership* (20%), *networking* (21%), *flexibility* (20%), and *motivation* (17%). In contrast, non-first-generation students were more likely to have responses coded for *reflection* (89%), *structure* (90%), *values* (89%), and *post-graduate service* (93%). Almost all *career* subthemes were more likely to be mentioned by non-first-generation alumni than by first-generation alumni: *resume boost* (91%), *career reflection and ideas* (90%), and *public service career* (92%)

Table 3. Frequency of Career Subtheme Occurrence by Gender

Career subtheme	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Career reflections/ideas	64	81%	15	19%
Resume boost	44	80%	11	20%
Public service career	25	68%	12	32%
Direct connection to job	7	88%	1	12%

³ The survey asked for respondents’ gender identities with the following options provided: female, genderqueer, intersex, male, transgender, self-identify (with a text box) and prefer not to respond. Only three (less than 1%) of respondents who selected “prefer not to respond” or “self-identify” answered any of the free response questions considered in this study.

Table 4. Frequency of Career Subtheme Occurrence by First-generation Status

Career subtheme	First-generation Status			
	First-generation		Not First-generation	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Career reflections/ideas	7	10%	69	90%
Resume boost	5	9%	55	91%
Public service career	3	8%	36	92%
Direct connection to job	1	12%	7	88%

DISCUSSION

When given the opportunity to articulate the most important elements of the Buckley Public Service Scholars program, career development does emerge as a significant theme in alumni responses but not the most consistent or strongly represented one. Even though a majority of alumni who responded do work in service-related occupations, it does not seem to be the primary outcome alumni associated with the program or its role in their development.

While connections to *career* were mentioned with less frequency in response to the questions about what alumni wished they had learned from the program or would suggest for improvements, this was in large part because fewer alumni responded to these questions, and so discussions of career actually emerged as a more significant theme in the responses overall. Notably, the emphasis of each subtheme followed a similar pattern to the important element question responses, with *career reflection/ideas* (31) mentioned most, then *resume boost* (19), then *public service career* (8) and, finally, *direct connection to job* (6). The role of the program in career development then can be seen to be first about career reflection and adding experiences to students' backgrounds that may help them in their future careers, whether those future careers might be within public service fields or not. This might suggest that any move

to shift the program to focus more on career development may be more successful if focusing on career-related reflection and trainings on how best to represent experiences as translatable and relevant in different contexts rather than focusing on forms of networking or professional development related to specific fields.

The ways in which response themes differed by gender and first-generation status revealed a complex picture that at times reinforced expectations from prior research and at other times raised further questions. For instance, the findings revealed that female alumni were more likely to mention *direct connection to job*, *career reflection/ideas*, and *resume boost*. This could be seen to contradict previous research that typically finds that males are more concerned about the extrinsic rewards of service than females. However, the findings being rooted in retrospective alumni perspectives may suggest an alternative interpretation. This aspired career focus may be a reflection of regrets after college: Female alumni may now wish that they had more opportunities during their college service program to reflect on career in broad ways, as well as build concrete connections, experiences, and skills for later careers. This is similar to other scholarly findings that suggest that females who do not spend as much time building toward career goals in college, and instead focus on social or other goals, sometimes regret their decisions after graduation (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013).

Further research would be needed to tease out the exact role that a student's gender might play in how they understand the relationship of a program like BPSS to their career development.

The findings based on participants' first-generation status similarly at times both reinforce and raise questions about previous findings. Previous research would have predicted that first-generation college students would be more likely than non-first-generation students to consider the importance of extrinsic rewards and career benefits from participation. Findings from this study are more mixed: Non-first-generation alumni were more likely to discuss *career reflection/ideas*, *resume boost*, and *public service career*. However, first-generation students were more likely to mention *leadership* and *networking*, which while not coded as a *career* subtheme in this analysis, are certainly extrinsic benefits from service participation that can undoubtedly aid career after graduation. The surprising findings about the *career* subthemes being more common for non-first-generation alumni may be explained by the fact that first-generation students are much more likely to choose their career prior to choosing a major, while non-first-generation students are much more likely to choose a major independent of career (Mullen, 2010). In other words, if first-generation students tend to choose a career early in college, they may need less assistance from a service program to help them discern their career ideas. Non-first-generation students may be more likely to choose their major based on interest and identify a specific career later in college. Thus, similar to the findings regarding gender differences, the survey responses from a retrospective perspective may reflect regrets some non-first-generation alumni had as they now report they wished they had more opportunities in college related to career reflection.

In all, these surprising findings about gender and social class suggest the critical importance of surveying alumni in addition to current students. As this study shows, alumni

may view their experiences in and returns from the program differently after the fact than they did as participants during college. Findings from this study suggest that it is possible that alumni's responses may reflect their regrets and wishes rather than their attitudes and experiences during college. The alternative interpretation of the findings based on females and non-first-generation alumni's responses calls for further exploration of their perceptions and experiences.

Many alumni report that public service programs would have been a good setting in which to have those reflections and career connections. Given the high number of alumni who indicated that they chose their current jobs in part due to their service work in college, public service programs may have more of a lasting impact on their participants if they follow the advice of these alumni by incorporating more career development in their programming.

LIMITATIONS

While this research contributes some understanding to the role that a multi-term public service program can play in career development, there are important limitations that should be noted. As BPSS is a relatively open and self-directed program, it can be difficult to tease out the difference between what alumni learn from the program itself (the framework offered and various forms of training and support) versus the often relatively independent primary experiences that make it up (such as service projects with which they were engaged). Some alumni talk about skills trainings or opportunities directly offered by the program, while others talk about their service experiences that were logged as part of the program but often arranged independently.

There is also extensive research that demonstrates that large differences exist in student experiences, expectations, and decisions across different types of universities (Brint et al., 2005; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Mullen, 2010). By only including data from a

large, elite, public research university, our results are not necessarily generalizable to all universities or service programs. In particular, the fact that the alumni of this study reported more desire for reflection on career paths rather than assistance in transitioning into specific positions may be due to the liberal arts nature of the university in which the program is located, as college students more generally increasingly want specific vocational training as part of their higher education degrees (Brint et al., 2005). In both program participation and in representation within this survey, our sample was also limited by self-selection bias, and the uneven demographics of respondents limit any inferences we could make about each population considered. Likewise, the number of responses for some codes and subcodes was relatively small, such that the differences by gender and first-generation status are merely suggestive of trends that more research should pursue. In several respects this research could be seen to raise more questions for further exploration. For instance, how might differences related to student identities influence how a program markets its connection to career development in targeted ways to different groups of students? How might more intentional marketing of the program's connection to career influence how students understand their goals in the program and their corresponding service engagement? How might the trainings and support offered related to career be tailored to better meet the needs and interests of students underserved by the university in general? What other aspects of student identities might significantly influence their understanding of the program's connection to career? While analyzing the data and considering its potential implications, the program staff have actively pursued applied forms of exploring these questions programmatically through subtle shifts in recruitment strategy, trainings offered, and framing of reflections.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to explore how alumni of a multi-term public service program understand the connection between the program and their career development and also how alumni responses differ among respondents of different genders and social class backgrounds. Our findings suggest that even if a multi-term service program offered by a university does not intend to focus on career development, alumni do see career development as a significant element of such a program and its potential impact and that many desire this to be a more explicit element of the programming. Considering our qualitative results suggest that many of these students want career development through the service programs in order to enter public service careers, it is a clear extension of the mission of college service programs to mentor students in understanding how to continue service through their future careers.

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